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Stitched
TERROR
NAHUEL LOPEZ 2017
AVATAR
DIGITAL
#1

TERROR
story
PAT SHAND

art
DANIEL GETE

GRAPHIC GRIMOIRE
story
PAT SHAND

art
DANIEL GETE

color for both stories and all covers
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KURT HATHAWAY

GALLERY
pages 37 - 48
JONATAS

COVERS
NAHUEL LOPEZ
Regular

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Wraparound

CHRISTIAN ZANIER
Lurking

MATT MARTIN
Gore

RENATO CAMILO
Brutal
POV
Fifty Shades Intense
Fifty Shades Torture

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GALLERY
pages 1, 2
MATT MARTIN
page 3
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pages 4 - 7
RAULO CACERES
page 8
RENATO CAMILO

HORRIFIED COVERS

RENATO CAMILO
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Stitched™

STITCHED

THE STITCHED ARE AN ANCIENT, UNDEAD EVIL. A CURSED BLACK LIQUID FILLS THE MORTAL SHELLS THAT HAVE HAD ALL OPENINGS SEWN SHUT, TAKING THEIR LIFE AND MUMMIFYING THEIR BODY. THEY THEN RESPOND TO ONLY ONE THING, THE SOUND OF ROCKS IN A CAN, AND THAT SETS THEM ON AN INDISCRIMINATE KILLING RAMPAGE. THEY FEEL NO PAIN. THEY CAN LOSE LIMBS, BE SHOT, BURNED, AND CRUSHED. ALL TO NO AVAIL, THEY WILL NOT STOP UNTIL THE SOUND THAT DRIVES THEM CEASES.

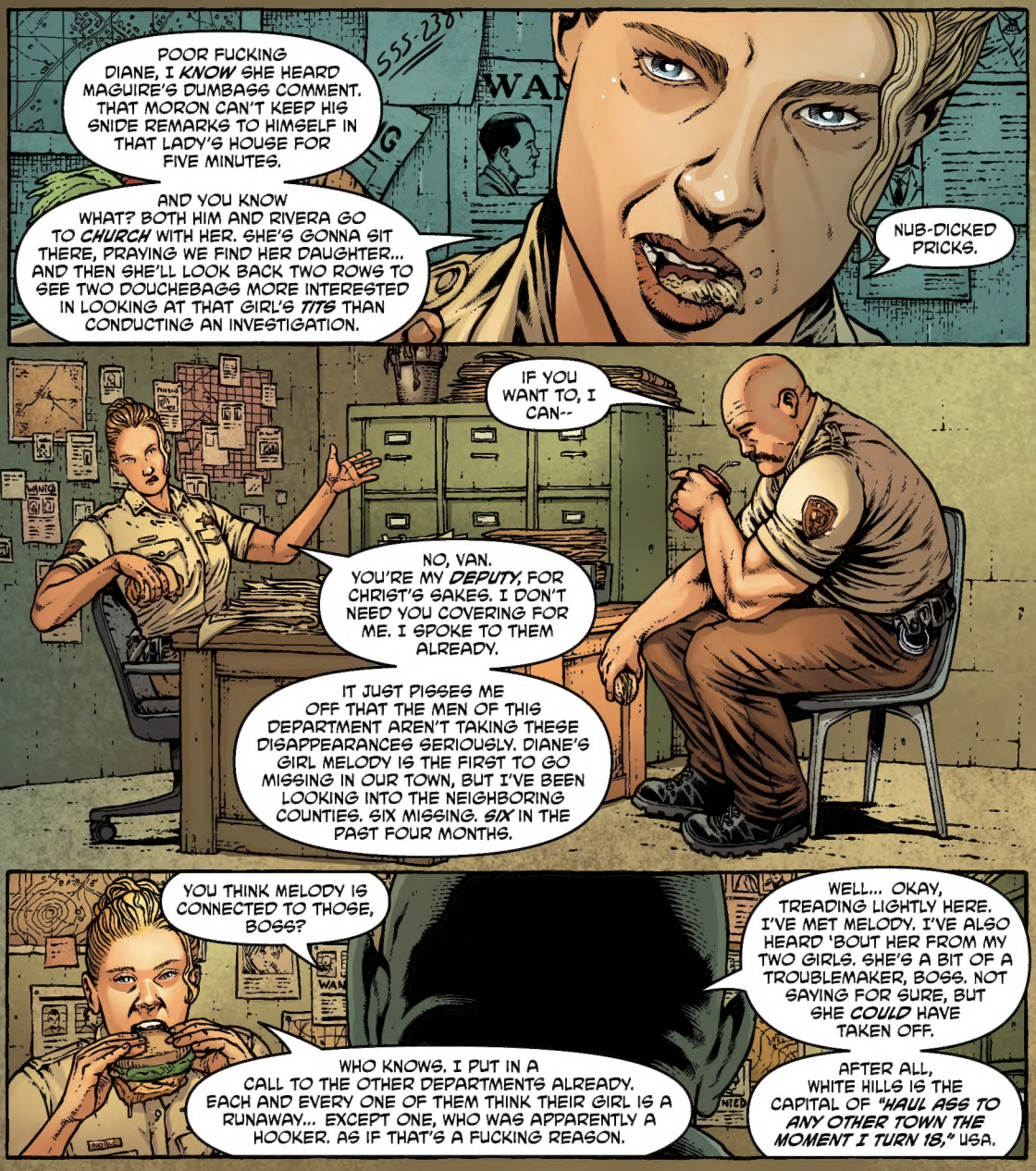
DASHT-E MARGO, AFGHANISTAN.
"THE DESERT OF DEATH."
<WE'RE DEPARTING THE EXCAVATION SITE NOW WITH THE BARRELS IN TOW. WE'LL ARRIVE AT THE TRANSPORT LOCATION IN TWENTY-TWO MINUTES.>
"<TO A NEW WORLD.>"
YOU SEEM RATHER EXCITED FOR SUCH A DREARY DISCOVERY.
OH. HAHA, I SUPPOSE I AM. I'VE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO JOIN THIS PROGRAM FOR A LONG TIME. I'M FINALLY ABLE TO FOLLOW MY DREAMS.
WELL, DON'T LET *THIS* GET YOU DOWN. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, YOU GET A PROMISING CALL... ONLY TO UNEARTH SOMETHING THAT HAD CLEARLY BEEN PUT IN THE GROUND NO MORE THAN THREE DECADES AGO.
IT'S THE *BOREDOM* AND THE *LETDOWN* THAT MAKES THE TRULY SPECIAL FINDINGS THAT MUCH BETTER IN THE END.
OH, I'M NOT LET DOWN *AT ALL.*
HOLD ON A MOMENT... I SEE SOMEONE COMING. IN THE DISTANCE, THERE.
MARSHALL! NINE O'CLOCK!

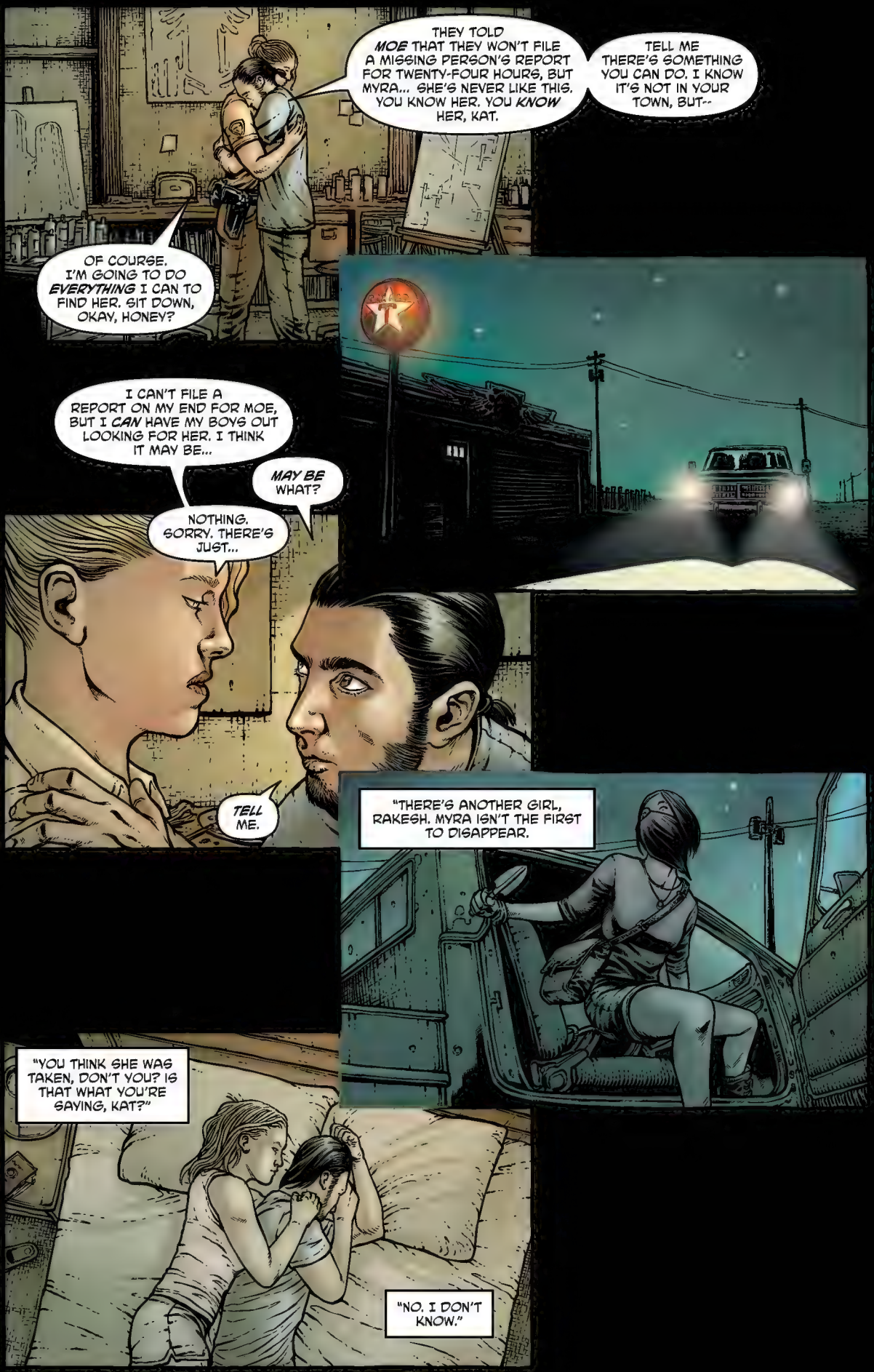
THERE'S--
FIRE!
DAMN! I CAN'T SEE WHERE IT'S COMING FROM!
ON THE GROUND! THEY'RE ALL THE FUCK OVER!
<TO A NEW WORLD.>

‹THANK YOU, FARIBA. YOU WILL SOON BE REWARDED FOR YOUR WORK. I RECOGNIZE THAT IT IS HARD TO MOVE AMONG THE SOULLESS AND TREAT THEM LIKE PEOPLE.›
‹IS *HE* GOING TO BE THE FIRST, JAMILA? ARE WE GOING TO DO IT *HERE*?›
‹HM. BRING ME ONE OF THE BARRELS. AND BE CAREFUL.›
‹WE MUST NOT SPILL A SINGLE, PRECIOUS DROP.›
GAKK--
‹AND FETCH THE *NEEDLE* AND *THREAD*.›

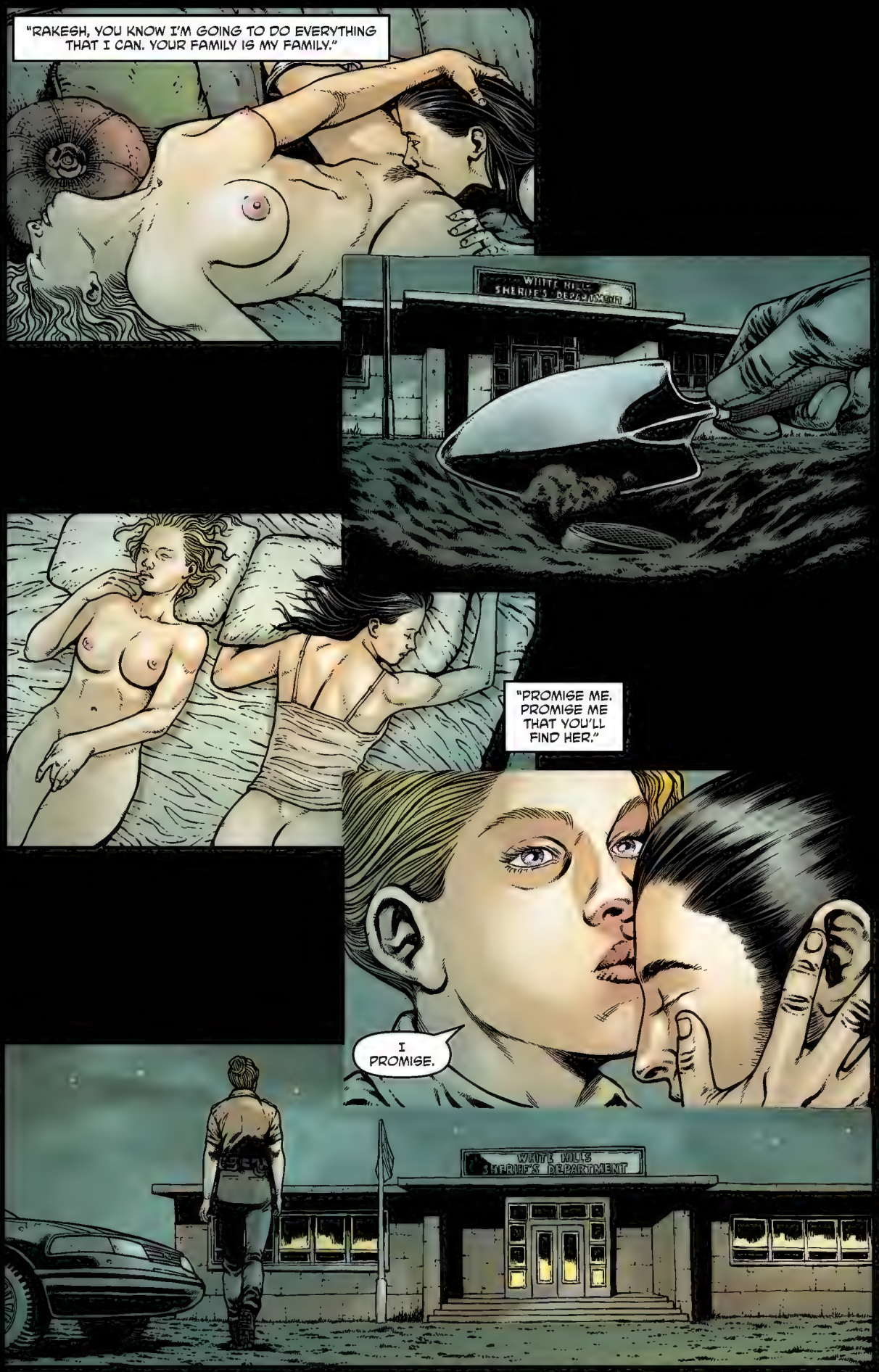
AAAAAEEEEIGH!
<JAMILA... HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THIS WILL WORK?>
<WE HAVE NOTHING BUT CONJECTURE AND MYTH AND THE STORIES OF MEN WE *LOATHE*.>
<IT WASN'T JUST THE MEN WHO SPOKE OF THE LEGEND, VIDA. MY MOTHER DID AS WELL.>
<SHE USED THE STORY TO *SCARE* MY SISTER AND I, BEFORE KISSING OUR CHEEKS GOODNIGHT. I AM NOT ASKING YOU TO HAVE *FAITH* IN ME, OR MY PLAN, OR THE LEGEND.>
<I WANT TO *SHOW* YOU THE TRUTH.>
<FAITH IS FOR MEN.>
<*FUCK* THEM BOTH.>

WHITE HILLS, TEXAS.
TWO YEARS LATER.
IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY, DIANE. TAKE IT NICE AND SLOW. AS BEST YOU CAN, TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED THE LAST DAY THAT YOU SAW YOUR DAUGHTER.
DID SHE MENTION WHERE SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN GOING?
N-NO, SHERIFF NOBLE. SHE... SHE JUST *LEFT*. "I'M GOING OUT! SEE YOU SOON, MOMMY." I-I WENT TO SAY GOODBYE, BUT SHE WASN'T-- SHE WAS ALREADY GONE. I DIDN'T EVEN SEE HER...
NOBLE
HEH. HEY, RIVERA. LOOK AT THIS.
WHAT DO YOU THINK SHE WAS DOING IN HER *SPARE TIME* THAT GOT HER CAUGHT UP IN SOME SHIT? THREE GUESSES.
OOOOH BOY. HAHA.
I'M JUST SAYING!
"FUCKING-- FUCKING *ASSHOLES*, IS WHAT THEY ARE. SOCIOPATHS, PROBABLY."

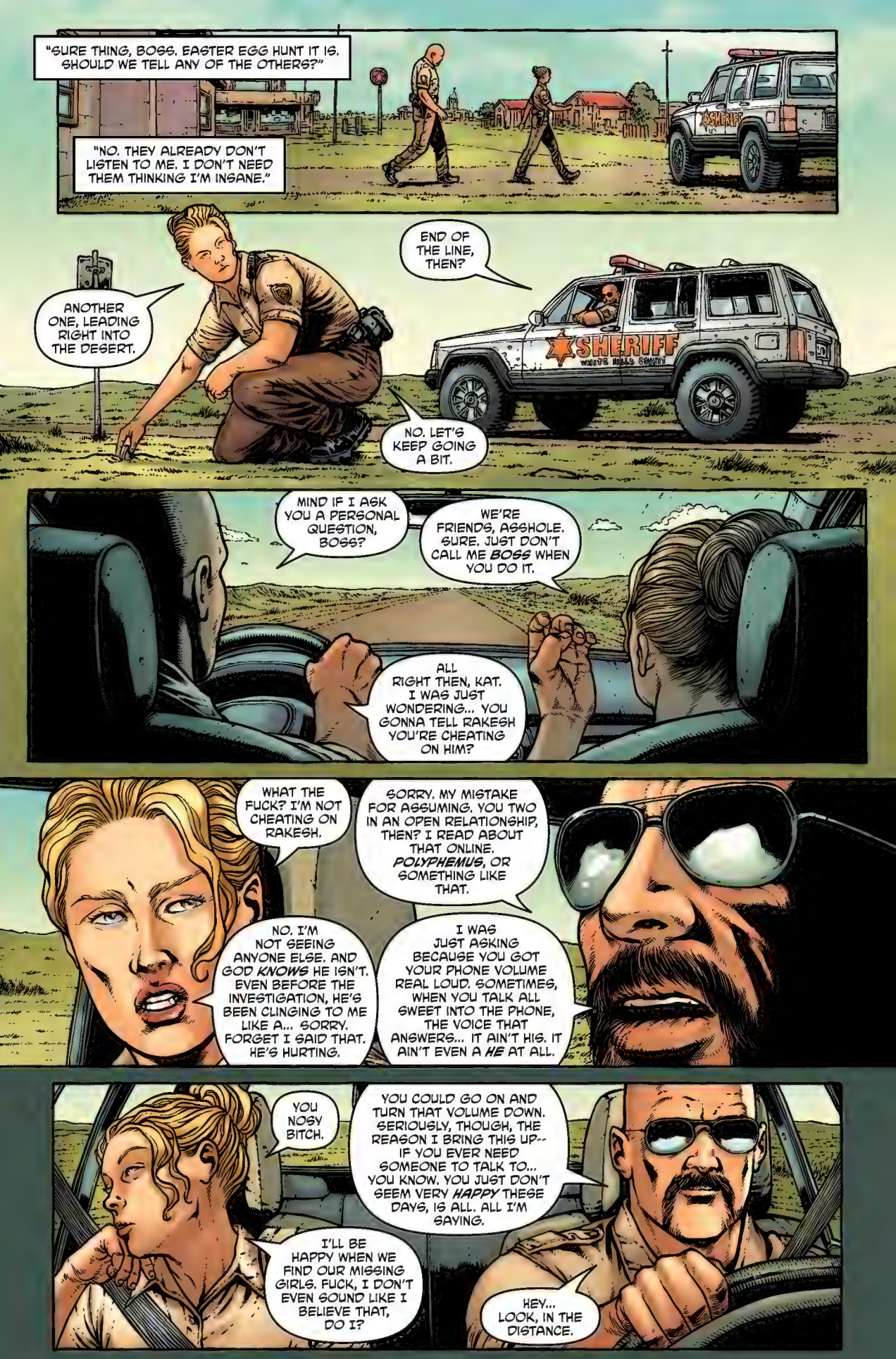

POOR FUCKING DIANE, I *KNOW* SHE HEARD MAGUIRE'S DUMBASS COMMENT. THAT MORON CAN'T KEEP HIS SNIDE REMARKS TO HIMSELF IN THAT LADY'S HOUSE FOR FIVE MINUTES.
AND YOU KNOW WHAT? BOTH HIM AND RIVERA GO TO *CHURCH* WITH HER. SHE'S GONNA SIT THERE, PRAYING WE FIND HER DAUGHTER... AND THEN SHE'LL LOOK BACK TWO ROWS TO SEE TWO DOUCHEBAGS MORE INTERESTED IN LOOKING AT THAT GIRL'S *TITS* THAN CONDUCTING AN INVESTIGATION.
NUB-DICKED PRICKS.
IF YOU WANT TO, I CAN--
NO, VAN. YOU'RE MY *DEPUTY*, FOR CHRIST'S SAKES. I DON'T NEED YOU COVERING FOR ME. I SPOKE TO THEM ALREADY.
IT JUST PISSES ME OFF THAT THE MEN OF THIS DEPARTMENT AREN'T TAKING THESE DISAPPEARANCES SERIOUSLY. DIANE'S GIRL MELODY IS THE FIRST TO GO MISSING IN OUR TOWN, BUT I'VE BEEN LOOKING INTO THE NEIGHBORING COUNTIES. SIX MISSING. *SIX* IN THE PAST FOUR MONTHS.
YOU THINK MELODY IS CONNECTED TO THOSE, BOSS?
WELL... OKAY, TREADING LIGHTLY HERE. I'VE MET MELODY. I'VE ALSO HEARD 'BOUT HER FROM MY TWO GIRLS. SHE'S A BIT OF A TROUBLEMAKER, BOSS. NOT SAYING FOR SURE, BUT SHE *COULD* HAVE TAKEN OFF.
WHO KNOWS. I PUT IN A CALL TO THE OTHER DEPARTMENTS ALREADY. EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM THINK THEIR GIRL IS A RUNAWAY... EXCEPT ONE, WHO WAS APPARENTLY A HOOKER. AS IF THAT'S A FUCKING REASON.
AFTER ALL, WHITE HILLS IS THE CAPITAL OF *"HAUL ASS TO ANY OTHER TOWN THE MOMENT I TURN 18,"* USA.
HOLD ON, VAN. FIFTH TIME RAKESH HAS CALLED ME. BETTER ANSWER AND SEE IF SOMETHING'S UP.
YOU DON'T SOUND PARTICULARLY THRILLED TO HEAR FROM HIM. TROUBLE IN PARADISE?
TROUBLE? ALWAYS. *PARADISE?* NOT IN A LONG TIME.
HEY, SLOW DOWN... JESUS. I'M SO SORRY, I--
HOW LONG HAS SHE BEEN GONE?
...AND YOUR BROTHER CALLED THE POLICE, RIGHT? HE... OKAY. OKAY, YES.
I'LL BE RIGHT THERE.
RAKESH'S NIECE, MAYA.
SHE'S MISSING.


THEY TOLD MOE THAT THEY WON'T FILE A MISSING PERSON'S REPORT FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS, BUT MYRA... SHE'S NEVER LIKE THIS. YOU KNOW HER. YOU KNOW HER, KAT.
TELL ME THERE'S SOMETHING YOU CAN DO. I KNOW IT'S NOT IN YOUR TOWN, BUT--
OF COURSE. I'M GOING TO DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO FIND HER. SIT DOWN, OKAY, HONEY?
I CAN'T FILE A REPORT ON MY END FOR MOE, BUT I CAN HAVE MY BOYS OUT LOOKING FOR HER. I THINK IT MAY BE...
MAY BE WHAT?
NOTHING. SORRY. THERE'S JUST...
TELL ME.
"THERE'S ANOTHER GIRL, RAKESH. MYRA ISN'T THE FIRST TO DISAPPEAR.
"YOU THINK SHE WAS TAKEN, DON'T YOU? IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING, KAT?"
"NO. I DON'T KNOW."

"FOR MYRA'S SAKE, THOUGH, DON'T PANIC. I'M GOING BACK TO THE STATION NOW AND I'M GOING TO MAKE EVERY MAN WITH A BADGE MEMORIZE HER FACE."
MISSING
MISSING
"I'M NOT GOING TO REST UNTIL WE FIND HER. OKAY?"
"YOU PROMISE?"


"RAKESH, YOU KNOW I'M GOING TO DO EVERYTHING THAT I CAN. YOUR FAMILY IS MY FAMILY."
WHITE HILLS SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT
"PROMISE ME. PROMISE ME THAT YOU'LL FIND HER."
I PROMISE.
WHITE HILLS SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

SHIT.
WHAT IN THE HELL?
MORNIN', BOSS.
UM... THANK YOU?
SPEAKERS. BURIED IN A LINE DOWN THE ROAD.
ARE WE PLAYING MAD LIBS RIGHT NOW?
SOMEONE PUT THESE IN THE GROUND. FRESHLY DUG HOLES. IT LEADS DOWN THE ROAD, AND THERE ARE *MORE*.
ANSWER ME SOMETHING, VAN. WHY THE *HELL* WOULD SOMEONE GO THROUGH THE TROUBLE OF BURYING A SPEAKER IN THE GROUND?
I DON'T KNOW. KINDA WEIRD, AIN'T IT?
VERY FUCKING WEIRD. I'D LIKE TO SEE WHERE THIS TRAIL OF *WEIRDNESS* LEADS.


"SURE THING, BOSS. EASTER EGG HUNT IT IS. SHOULD WE TELL ANY OF THE OTHERS?"
"NO. THEY ALREADY DON'T LISTEN TO ME. I DON'T NEED THEM THINKING I'M INSANE."
SHERIFF
ANOTHER ONE, LEADING RIGHT INTO THE DESERT.
END OF THE LINE, THEN?
SHERIFF
WHITE HILLS COUNTY
NO. LET'S KEEP GOING A BIT.
MIND IF I ASK YOU A PERSONAL QUESTION, BOSS?
WE'RE FRIENDS, ASSHOLE. SURE. JUST DON'T CALL ME BOSS WHEN YOU DO IT.
ALL RIGHT THEN, KAT. I WAS JUST WONDERING... YOU GONNA TELL RAKESH YOU'RE CHEATING ON HIM?
WHAT THE FUCK? I'M NOT CHEATING ON RAKESH.
SORRY. MY MISTAKE FOR ASSUMING. YOU TWO IN AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP, THEN? I READ ABOUT THAT ONLINE. POLYPHEMUS, OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT.
NO. I'M NOT SEEING ANYONE ELSE. AND GOD KNOWS HE ISN'T. EVEN BEFORE THE INVESTIGATION, HE'S BEEN CLINGING TO ME LIKE A... SORRY. FORGET I SAID THAT. HE'S HURTING.
I WAS JUST ASKING BECAUSE YOU GOT YOUR PHONE VOLUME REAL LOUD. SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU TALK ALL SWEET INTO THE PHONE, THE VOICE THAT ANSWERS... IT AIN'T HIS. IT AIN'T EVEN A HE AT ALL.
YOU NOSY BITCH.
YOU COULD GO ON AND TURN THAT VOLUME DOWN. SERIOUSLY, THOUGH, THE REASON I BRING THIS UP-- IF YOU EVER NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO... YOU KNOW. YOU JUST DON'T SEEM VERY HAPPY THESE DAYS, IS ALL. ALL I'M SAYING.
I'LL BE HAPPY WHEN WE FIND OUR MISSING GIRLS. FUCK, I DON'T EVEN SOUND LIKE I BELIEVE THAT, DO I?
HEY... LOOK, IN THE DISTANCE.

WHAT IN THE HELL IS THIS?
NOT ON THE MAP, IS WHAT. LAST I WAS HERE... THIS THING WASN'T. THIS OUR JURISDICTION?
NO.
THEN WHAT'S THE CALL, BOSS?
JESUS H.
OH MY GOD. BOSS--
KEEP IT DOWN. THEY HAVE THREE VEHICLES OUTSIDE. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS.
JESUS CHRIST... WHO WOULD DO THIS? WHO COULD POSSIBLY...
CUT THEM LOOSE AND GET THEM INTO THE CAR. IF I'M NOT BACK IN FOUR MINUTES, OR IF YOU HEAR SHOTS FIRED, COME FOR ME. IF NOT, I'LL MEET YOU THERE.

BOSS, NO! WE HAVE TO CALL FOR BACK-UP. YOU SAID IT YOURSELF, THEY GOT THREE VEHICLES, AND--
AND IF THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE, THEY ALREADY KNOW ***WE'RE*** HERE. I HAVE TO SEE IF MYRA IS ON SITE. IF WE LEAVE OR WAIT FOR BACK-UP, WE GIVE THEM THE CHANCE TO CLEAR OUT.
BOSS, PLEASE. KAT!

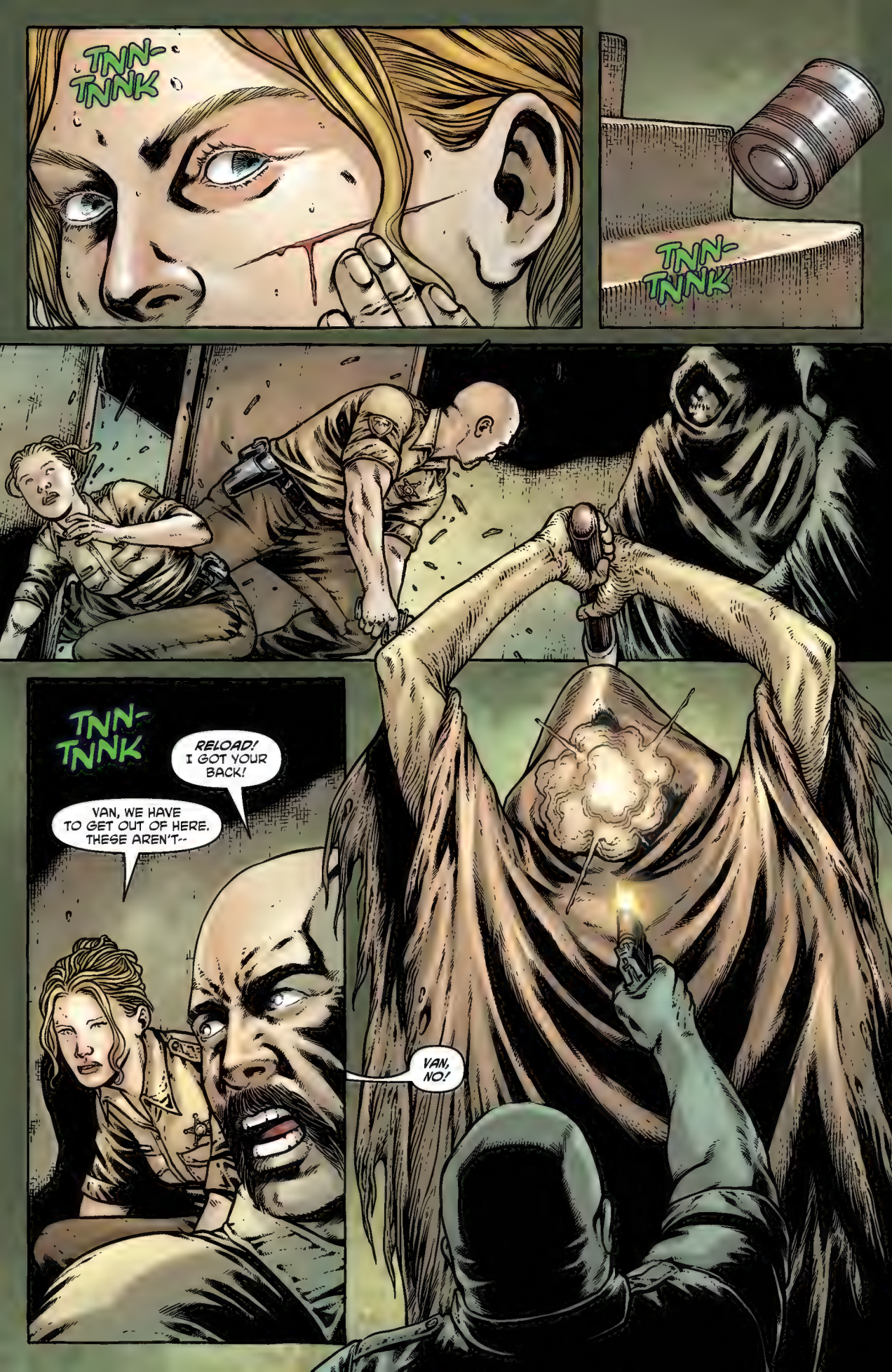
AGHK!
NOBLE

FUCK--
HAHAHAHA!
<YES! YES, YES!>
NOBLE

OH, JESUS CHRIST!

POLICE! FREEZE!
DROP IT! HANDS ON YOUR HEAD! NOW!
CERTAINLY. WHATEVER YOU SAY.
TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
OH, FUCK! FUCK!

I'M COMING, BOSS!
TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
NO FUCKING WAY. NO FUCKING--
TNN-TNNK


TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
RELOAD! I GOT YOUR BACK!
VAN, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE. THESE AREN'T--
VAN, NO!

TNN-TNNK
TNN-TNNK
HAHAHA! EVERYONE, PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD NOW. WE MUST SURRENDER!
THE POLICE ARE HERE, YOU SEE.
NEXT TO A NEW WORLD

STITCHED: CADAVER
A GRAPHIC GRIMOIRE

CADAVER – PART ONE

THE WIND SMELLED LIKE FIRE ON THE DAY THAT JAMILA AND HER LITTLE SISTER DISCOVERED THE SEVERED HEAD.

JAMILA HAD WOKEN UP TO HER MOTHER SHAKING HER SHOULDERS, SPEAKING FRANTIC WORDS THAT SOUNDED LIKE GIBBERISH IN THE YOUNG GIRL'S MIND, STILL FOGGY FROM SLEEP. IT TOOK ANOTHER ROUGH SHAKE FOR JAMILA TO WAKE TO THE SIGHT OF HER MOTHER'S BROWN EYES – WIDE, FRANTIC CIRCLES – STARING DOWN AT HER. JAMILA'S YOUNGER SISTER, HESTER, WHO HAD TURNED EIGHT TWO NIGHTS BEFORE, WAS ALREADY AWAKE, PULLING ON A PAIR OF SOCKS.

"I NEED YOU ***UP,***" THEIR MOTHER HISSED. SHE NEVER MEANT TO SOUND HARSH, BUT HER VOICE WAS DISTORTED FROM WHAT JAMILA'S PARENTS ALWAYS REFERRED TO AS 'THE INJURY.' HER VOICE, EVEN WHEN SHE EXPRESSED WORDS OF LOVE, WAS A HARSH RASP THAT SQUEAKED AND CROAKED ON THE CONSONANTS. TODAY, THOUGH, JAMILA KNEW WAS DIFFERENT, EVEN IN HER WAKING MOMENTS. SOMETHING WAS ***HAPPENING.***

"I'M UP," JAMILA SAID. FOLLOWING HESTER'S LEAD, SHE WENT TO THE CLOSET AND PULLED OUT HER BASKET OF CLEAN CLOTHING. AS SHE GOT DRESSED, SHE LOOKED UP AT HER MOTHER FOR INSTRUCTIONS, HER HEART POUNDING IN HER CHEST.

SHE WAS SURE THEY WERE COMING FOR THEM, AT LAST. THE PEOPLE HER FATHER CALLED 'THE BAD MEN.' THE MEN WHO GAVE THEIR MOTHER 'THE INJURY.' JAMILA'S MIND RACED WITH IMAGES OF HER, HESTER, AND HER PARENTS ON THE RUN, HIDING OUT IN DITCHES AND SEWERS AS MEN WITH GUNS IN THEIR GRIP AND DEATH IN EYES HUNTING THEM DOWN LIKE ANIMALS.

"TAKE YOUR SISTER OUT," HER MOTHER SAID, LOOKING OUT TOWARD THE HALL. JAMILA NOTICED, NOW, A QUIET DIN COMING FROM THE LIVING ROOM OF VOICES THAT SHE DIDN'T RECOGNIZE.

"WHO IS HERE?" JAMILA ASKED.

"THEY'RE ***GREEN,***" HESTER REPLIED.

"HUSH," HER MOTHER SAID, KNEELING TO JAMILA. "YOUR FATHER AND I HAVE TO SPEAK WITH THESE MEN."

"ARE THEY... ARE THEY THE BAD MEN?" JAMILA ASKED.

HER MOTHER SHOOK HER HEAD, AND TOUCHED JAMILA'S CHEEK. WHEN SHE DID, HER HAIR, WHICH WAS ALWAYS STYLED TO COVER HER NECK, MOVED, SHOWING A FLASH OF THE SCAR THAT RAN THE LENGTH OF HER THROAT. THE SKIN WAS RAISED OVER THE CUT LIKE A BUBBLE.

"NO," HER MOTHER RASPED. "THESE MEN ARE HERE TO HELP. WE NEED THE HOUSE EMPTY, THOUGH. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"YES," JAMILA RESPONDED. AND SHE DID. SHE KNEW HER PARENTS WANTED TO HIDE THE TRUTH FROM HER AND HESTER. JAMILA LISTENED CLOSELY WHEN HER PARENTS' VOICES DROPPED TO A WHISPER, KNOWING THOSE WERE THE TIMES WHEN SHE'D FIND OUT THE THINGS SHE WASN'T MEANT TO KNOW.

AND JAMILA KNEW QUITE A BIT.

"KEEP HER SAFE," HER MOTHER SAID. "AND YOURSELF AS WELL. YOU KNOW NOT TO GO TOO FAR, RIGHT?"

"RIGHT."

ONCE THEY WERE DRESSED, JAMILA'S MOTHER USHERED THEM OUT OF THEIR SMALL HOUSE. KNOWING SHE MIGHT GET A SMACK ON THE CHEEK FOR IT LATER ON, AS SHE PASSED HER FATHER AND THE MEN IN THE LIVING ROOM, SHE STOLE A GLANCE AT THEM. JAMILA ALMOST BURST OUT INTO LAUGHTER. THEY WERE, AS HESTER SAID, ***GREEN.*** THEY WORE GREEN UNIFORMS, BIG BOOTS, AND CLUNKY HATS. THEY HAD GUN, JUST AS JAMILA IMAGINED THE BAD MEN TO HAVE, BUT BEFORE SHE COULD LOOK AT THEIR EYES TO SEE WHAT WAS BEHIND THEIR GAZE, THEIR MOTHER HUSTLED HER OUT OF THE DOOR.

JAMILA TOOK HESTER'S HAND, SIGHING DEEPLY – AN ABSURDLY ADULT ACT FROM A GIRL SO YOUNG. SHE LOOKED TO HER YOUNGER SISTER.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?"

"DIG."

JAMILA RAISED A BROW. SHE WAS ALREADY FRUSTRATED WITH HESTER, KNOWING WHERE THIS WAS GOING, BUT KNEW THAT IF SHE COMPLAINED ***NOW,*** FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, SHE'D HAVE TO DEAL WITH HESTER'S CRABBINESS ALL DAY. SO SHE SIMPLY ASKED, "DIG ***WHERE?***"

"I'M DIGGING A HOLE TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD," HESTER REPLIED, AND PULLED ON HER SISTER'S HAND. THEY WALKED FOR A WHILE IN SILENCE, PAST WHERE JAMILA KNEW HER MOTHER WOULD'VE WANTED HER TO STOP. FINALLY, RIGHT WHEN JAMILA WAS ABOUT TO SUGGEST THEY TURN BACK, THEY STOPPED AT THE DIRT YARD NEXT TO HESTER'S SCHOOL. IT WAS SATURDAY, AND THE BUILDING WAS EMPTY. IT UNNERVED JAMILA, WHO WANTED TO GO, BUT HESTER KNELT DOWN TO A LARGE HOLE IN THE GROUND – FAR BIGGER AND DEEPER THAN JAMILA HAD IMAGINED – AND BEGAN DIGGING WITH HER BARE HANDS.

"YOU'VE BEEN DOING THIS DURING SCHOOL?" JAMILA ASKED.

"NO," HESTER SAID. "AFTER SCHOOL. BEFORE, SOMETIMES."

"IT'S NOT THAT DEEP," JAMILA LIED.

"IF I DIG UNTIL I'M MOM'S AGE, MAYBE I'LL GET TO THE OTHER SIDE," HESTER SAID WITH HER MATTER-OF-FACT VOICE. AS IF ***THAT*** MADE SENSE.

"WHAT'S ON THE OTHER SIDE?" JAMILA ASKED, ROLLING HER EYES.

HESTER GRINNED. "I DON'T KNOW!"

JAMILA STOOD, KICKING DIRT FOR A FEW MINUTES BEFORE SIGHING AGAIN AND COMING DOWN TO JOIN HESTER IN HER DIG.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY LET YOU DO THIS," JAMILA SAID. "IF I MADE A HOLE IN THE GROUND LIKE THIS AT MY SCHOOL, THEY'D SLAP ME ACROSS THE KNUCKLES."

JUST THEN, JAMILA'S HAND TOUCHED SOMETHING SOFT AND SOLID.

HESTER NOTICED JAMILA'S DISCOVERY, HER EYES LIGHTING UP WITH INTEREST. SHE BEGAN TO DIG WHERE JAMILA HAD BEEN, PAWING AT THE DIRT UNTIL SOMETHING STUCK UP, AS CLEAR AS THE SUN IN THE SKY.

IT WAS A NOSE.

SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH IT, THOUGH, BESIDE IT BEING IN THE DIRT. THE NOSTRILS WERE SEWN TOGETHER WITH BLACK THREAD.

JAMILA, HER HEART POUNDING IN HER CHEST, STOOD. WITHOUT A WORD, SHE REACHED DOWN TO PULL HESTER AWAY FROM THE NOSE, NOT WANTING TO DISCOVER ANYTHING MORE, BUT HESTER JERKED AWAY.

"IT'S A MAN," HESTER SAID, HER VOICE SHRILL WITH FEAR AND UNMISTAKABLE EXCITEMENT.

JAMILA, HER STOMACH TWISTING INTO KNOTS, HUNG BACK AS HESTER DUG AROUND THE HEAD. THERE WAS NO BODY ATTACHED TO IT, NOR ANY OTHER PARTS. THE HEAD, NOW UNCOVERED, SAT ALONE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE PIT, ITS EYELIDS AND FROWN ALSO STITCHED SHUT. VEINS HUNG FROM ITS NECK LIKE BLACK WORMS, THE BASE OF ITS SPINE, BROKEN INCHES BELOW THE FLESH OF THE NECK STOPPED, CAKED WITH DIRT LIKE A ROOT RIPPED FROM THE GROUND.

"ENOUGH," JAMILA BARKED. SHE PULLED HESTER AWAY.

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEY WERE OUT OF THE HOLE THAT JAMILA NOTICED HESTER WAS CRYING. SHE HUGGED HER SISTER, WISHING SHE'D BEEN MORE INSTANT. IF HER MOTHER HAD BEEN THERE, SHE NEVER WOULD HAVE LET THEM WALK ALL THE WAY TO THE SCHOOL. IF SHE'D KNOWN ABOUT THIS, SHE NEVER WOULD'VE LET HESTER DIG. SHE WAS JUST A GIRL. SHE DIDN'T NEED TO KNOW THINGS LIKE THIS EXISTED.

JAMILA WONDERED IF THE SAME BAD MEN WHO'D GIVEN HER MOTHER THE INJURY WERE THE MEN WHO DID THIS. SHE WONDERED IF PERHAPS HESTER KNEW MORE THAN SHE LET ON ABOUT HER MOTHER'S SECRET.

WHEN HESTER'S SOBS STOPPED, JAMILA STOOD TO FULL HEIGHT AND LED HER SISTER AWAY FROM THE PIT BY HAND. "IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY," JAMILA SAID.

"WHO DID THAT?" HESTER ASKED, HER VOICE THICK.

"I DON'T KNOW," JAMILA SAID. "JUST TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT... I THINK THOSE MEN ARE HERE TO MAKE THINGS BETTER."

"THE GREEN MEN," HESTER SAID.

"YES," JAMILA SAID. "THE GREEN MEN."

JAMILA AND HESTER SAT NEARBY THEIR HOME AS THEY WAITED FOR THE GREEN MEN – JAMILA KNEW THAT THESE WERE THE AMERICANS SHE'D HEARD HER FATHER TALKING ABOUT – TO LEAVE. THE WHOLE TIME, THE TWO GIRLS SAT IN SILENCE. JAMILA WISHED SHE COULD OFFER COMFORTING WORDS TO HER OVERLY CURIOUS SISTER, BUT THE TRUTH WAS, SHE WASN'T MUCH OLDER THAN TEN HERSELF. SHE COULDN'T SHAKE THE GRUESOME IMAGES FROM FLASHING THROUGH HER MIND AS SHE IMAGINED HOW THE MAN DIED. TORTURED, CLEARLY... AND THEN, AFTER HE WAS SEWN TOGETHER TO MUFFLE THE SCREAMS, SHE IMAGINED THEY CUT HIS THROAT, SLOWLY SAWING THROUGH THE FLESH UNTIL THEY GOT TO THE BONE. SHE FELT BILE BURN THE BACK OF HER THROAT, AND SWALLOWED.

AS THE SKY BEGAN TO DARKEN, THEY GOT INTO A LARGE VEHICLE THAT TOOK THEM AWAY. AS IT SPED DOWN THE ROAD, IT GAVE OFF A SOUND LIKE GUNFIRE GOING OFF.

ONCE INSIDE, JAMILA WAITED FOR HESTER TO BLURT OUT WHAT THEY'D FOUND, BUT THE YOUNG GIRL REMAINED QUIET. THIS TIME, JAMILA FOLLOWED SUIT. IT WASN'T UNTIL THEIR FATHER SAT THEM DOWN THAT THEY BEGAN TO FEEL SOMEWHAT SAFE AGAIN, AS IF THE WORLD THEY KNEW BEFORE UNCOVERING THE DEAD MAN'S HEAD HADN'T FULLY CRUMBLED.

THEIR FATHER WAS A STOIC MAN WITH SERIOUS EYES AND A MEASURED TONE – THE PICTURE OF RESTRAINT, DOWN TO HIS MODEST HAIRCUT AND PERFECTLY TRIMMED BEARD. HE HELD ONE OF EACH OF THEIR HANDS AS HE SPOKE TO THEM.

"I DON'T WANT YOU GIRLS TO BE AFRAID," HE SAID. "THE SOLDIERS WHO WERE HERE TODAY CAME TO HELP US. AND THEY WANTED ***MY*** HELP AS WELL."

"TO GET THE BAD MEN?" HESTER SAID. JAMILA LOOKED AT HER, WAITING FOR HER TO BURST INTO TEARS. HOW COULD SHE NOT?

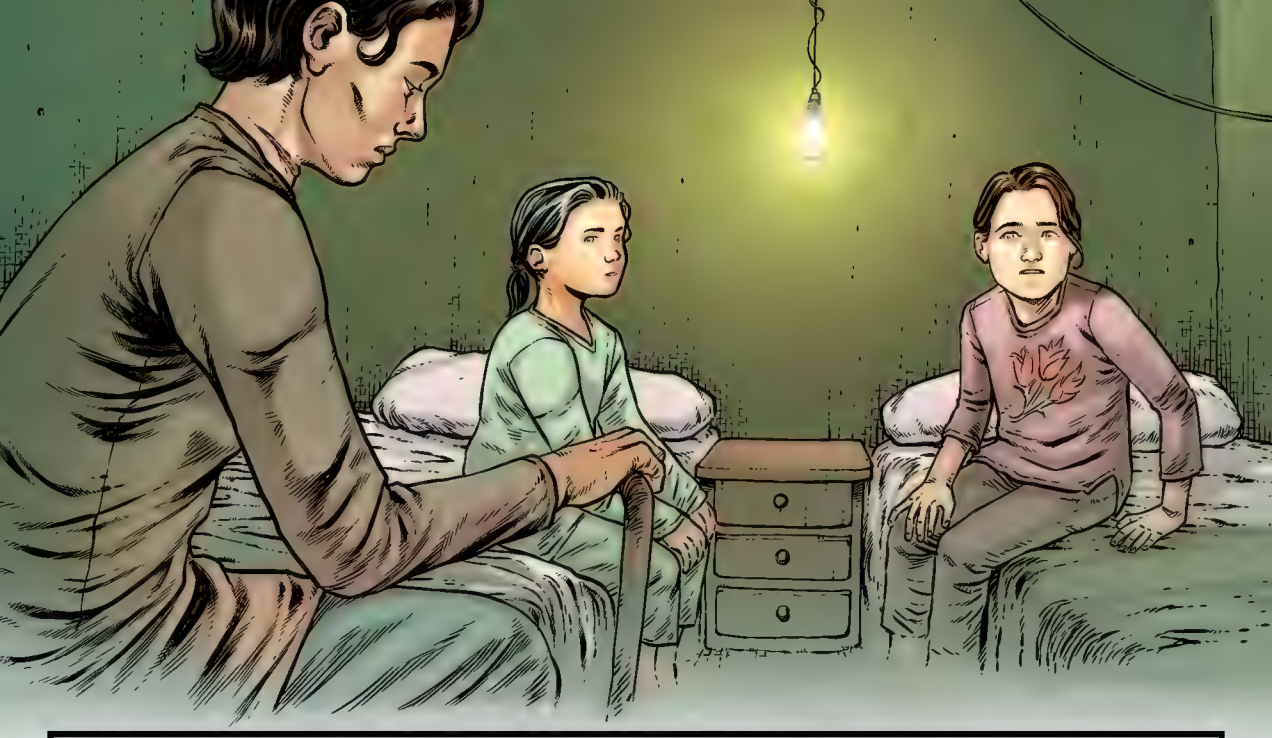
"YES," THEIR FATHER REPLIED. "SO THAT I NEVER HAVE TO BE AFRAID FOR YOU EVER AGAIN. SO THAT I NEVER HAVE TO WISH THAT YOU'D BEEN BORN BOYS, SO THAT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO LEARN THE TRUTH OF THIS CRUEL WORLD. SO THINGS CAN BE... BETTER. SO THEY CAN BE RIGHT."

HESTER NODDED. "GOOD. I WANT THEM TO GET THE BAD MEN."

JAMILA FELT HER OWN LIP TREMBLE. SHE BIT IT. IF HESTER COULD HIDE HER FEAR, SHE KNEW SHE MUST AS WELL.

THAT NIGHT, JAMILA'S DREAMS WERE HAUNTED BY THE FACE IN THE DIRT. HER NIGHTMARES TWISTED REALITY INTO A HELLISH VISION OF THE HEAD CLIMBING OUT OF THE HOLE LIKE A SPIDER, ITS VEINS ELONGATING AND PULLING IT ALONG. IT RAN AFTER HER, CHASING HER ALL THE WAY HOME.

JAMILA MADE IT INSIDE, SLAMMING THE DOOR SHUT, BUT BEFORE SHE COULD BACK AWAY FROM IT, THE HEAD SLAMMED INTO THE WOOD, SPLINTERING IT. FALLING BACK, JAMILA SCREAMED AS THE HEAD BURST THROUGH THE DOOR AND CRAWLED OVER HER, BLACK OOZE FLOWING OUT OF ITS OPEN THROAT.



"JAMILA?" HER MOTHER'S VOICE SOUNDED, AN AIRY RASP FROM BEHIND. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

JAMILA SCREAMED, PULLING THE HEAD OFF OF HER. SHE FLUNG IT BY ITS SEWN-UP EAR ACROSS THE ROOM. TO HER HORROR, IT LANDED AT HER MOTHER'S FEET. THE HEAD CLIMBED UP HER MOTHER'S BODY, LEAVING A TRAIL OF BLACK IN ITS WAKE.

"MOTHER!" JAMILA SCREAMED. "WATCH OUT!"

THE SEVERED HEAD STRETCHED ITS JAW UNTIL IT LIPS RIPPED FREE OF THE STITCHED, EXPOSING A MOUTH FULL OF ROTTED, GREY TEETH. JUST AS JAMILA'S MOTHER WENT TO SCREAM, THE HEAD BIT HER IN THE NECK AND RIPPED WITH INCREDIBLE FORCE, OPENING HER NECK IN A FLASH OF RED.

JAMILA SCREAMED AND SCREAMED UNTIL, AS SHE MOTHER BLED OUT ON THE GROUND, HESTER WALKED INTO THE ROOM. SHE WORE THE SAME GREEN UNIFORM AS THE AMERICANS, AND SHE HELD A CAN IN HER HANDS. SHE SHOOK IT, MAKING WHATEVER WAS INSIDE RATTLE. THE HEAD, WHICH HAD BEEN SLURPING UP HER MOTHER'S BLOOD, TURNED TO THE LITTLE GIRL.

"COME ON, JAMILA," HESTER SAID, RATTLING THE CAN. "LET'S DIG THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE."

THAT MORNING, JAMILA WOKE UP COVERED IN SWEAT. HER MIND STILL RACING FROM THE DREAM, HER EYES SETTLED ON HESTER, WHOSE CHEST SLOWLY ROSE AND FELL AS SHE SLEPT. JAMILA BREATHED IN A DEEP, SHAKY SIGH OF RELIEF. AS INSANE AS IT HAD BEEN, IT FELT SO REAL.

THE AMERICANS CAME AGAIN THAT DAY, BUT THIS TIME THEY DIDN'T STAY LONG. INSTEAD, THEIR FATHER GOT IN THE NOISY CAR AND WENT WITH THEM, LEAVING THE WOMEN ALONE IN THE HOUSE. HESTER HAD BEEN QUIET ALL DAY AND JAMILA, NO LONGER ABLE TO TAKE IT, WALKED UP TO THEIR MOTHER AND TOLD HER WHAT HAPPENED.

"NO!" HESTER SNAPPED BACK JUST AS JAMILA GOT TO THE PART ABOUT THE STITCHES. "SHE'S MAKING IT UP!"

"YOU'RE SCARED OF GETTING IN TROUBLE," JAMILA SNAPPED BACK. "THIS IS IMPORTANT. WHAT IF THIS CAN HELP DAD AND THE GREEN – ER, THE SOLDIERS?"

HESTER BEGAN AN ANGRY RETORT, BUT THEIR MOTHER HUSHED IT BY HOLDING OUT A HAND. "PLEASE," SHE SAID. "PEACE."

THE GIRLS, NOW QUIET, LOOKED AT HER. SHE SEEMED UNNERVED BUT, ODDLY, NOT SURPRISED.

"YOU SAY THIS WAS BY THE SCHOOL?" SHE ASKED.

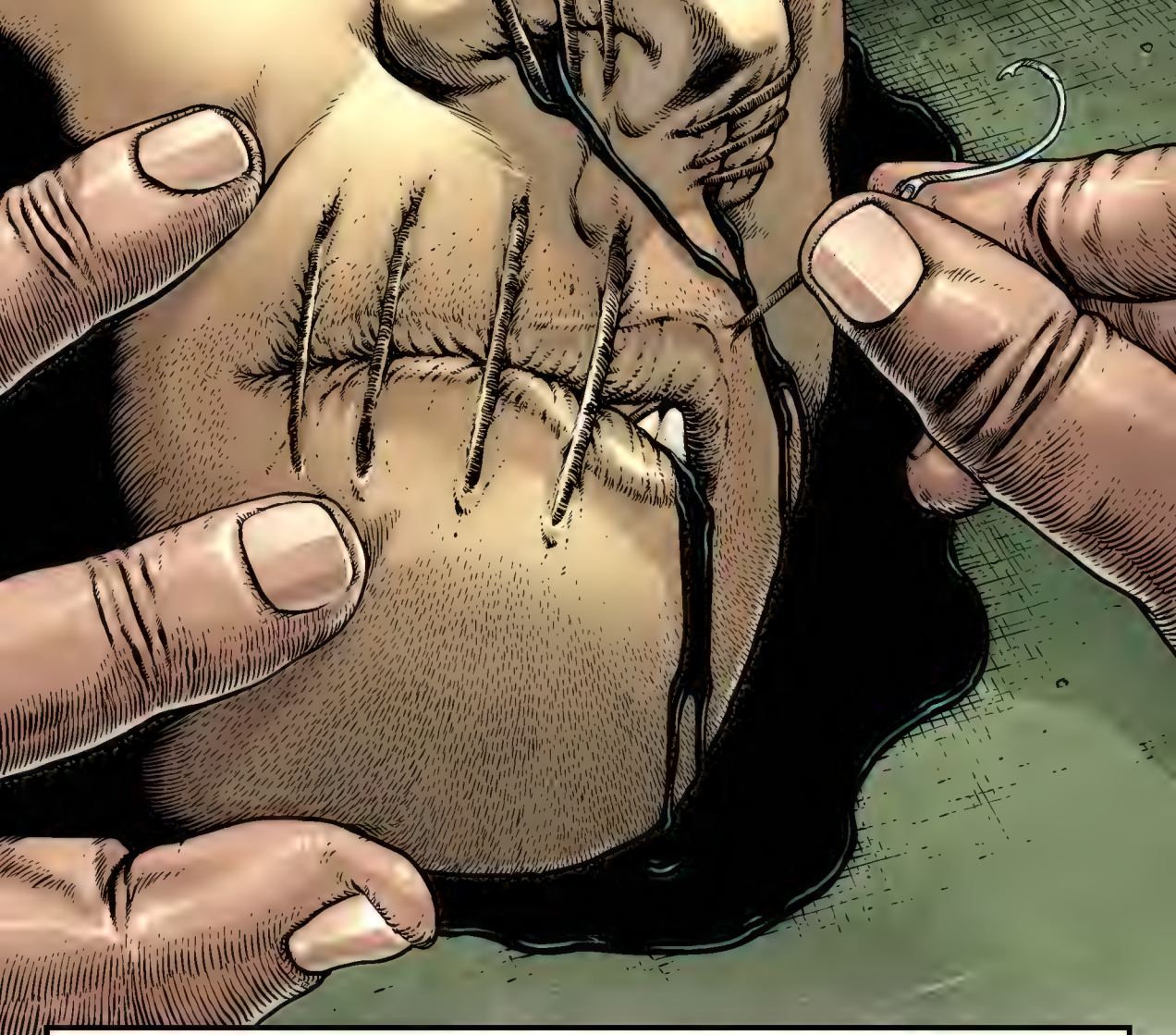
JAMILA NODDED.

"YOU ARE NOT TO DIG NEAR THERE AGAIN. NOR ***ANYWHERE.*** AND YOU'RE NOT IN TROUBLE... YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN," THEIR MOTHER SAID. "DISCOVERING SOMETHING SO HORRIBLE IS MORE PUNISHMENT THAN EITHER OF YOU COULD EVER DESERVE IN YOUR LIVES. I AM SO SORRY THAT YOU'VE HAD TO SEE THE WORST OF THIS WORLD."

AS SHE HELD THEM AND HESTER CRIED, JAMILA LOOKED UP AT HER MOTHER. "WHO DID THAT? THE BAD MEN?"

JAMILA'S MOTHER BREATHED OUT THROUGH HER NOSE AND LOOKED DOWN. "I DON'T KNOW."

IN THAT MOMENT, JAMILA HUGGED HER MOTHER, KNOWING FOR CERTAIN THAT SHE'D BEEN LIED TO.



AFTER HESTER WAS ASLEEP, JAMILA CREPT OUT OF BED AND PADDED INTO HER PARENTS' BEDROOM. SHE SAT NEXT TO HER MOTHER, WHO WAS UNDER THE COVERS ALONE. THE SHEET WAS PULLED UP HIGH, BUT NOT HIGH ENOUGH TO COVER THE SCAR ALONG HER NECK.

JAMILA TOOK HER HAND, SHAKING IT LIGHTLY UNTIL HER MOTHER WOKE UP.

"OH..." SHE SAID, HER VOICE THICK WITH SLEEP. "DON'T WORRY... YOUR FATHER WILL BE BACK TOMORROW."

JAMILA LOOKED HER STRAIGHT IN THE EYE. "DO YOU THINK THE SAME MEN WHO CUT YOUR THROAT ARE THE MEN WHO PUT THE HEAD IN THE GROUND?"

CONFUSION FLASHED ACROSS HER MOTHER'S FACE, AND THEN ANGER. FOR A LONG MOMENT, JAMILA THOUGHT SHE WAS ABOUT TO GET CRACKED IN THE HEAD. THEN, INSTEAD, HER MOTHER SQUEEZES HER HAND AND SAT UP IN BED.

"I DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW THINGS YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW," SHE SAID. "I WANT TO PROTECT YOU FROM THE WORLD... UNTIL I CAN GIVE YOU A NEW ONE, AT LEAST."

"I WANT TO KNOW," JAMILA SAID. "I SHOULD KNOW. I'M GETTING OLDER... AND I WANT TO PROTECT HESTER."

JAMILA'S MOTHER CLOSED HER EYES, FIGHTING BACK TEARS. SHE RUBBED HER DAUGHTER'S HAND AND SIGHED. THIS TIME, WHEN SHE ANSWERED, SHE DIDN'T AVERT HER GAZE. SHE LOOKED JAMILA RIGHT IN THE EYE.

"THERE IS A LEGEND... ABOUT SOMETHING THAT THE BAD MEN DID," SHE SAID. "I WAS NEVER CERTAIN IF IT WAS TRUE. BUT WHAT YOU SAW..."

"THE HEAD," JAMILA SAID. "THE STITCHED HEAD."

"YES," HER MOTHER REPLIED. "I CAN TELL YOU WHAT I HEARD... AND SOME THINGS I SAW. BUT YOU MUST PROMISE TO NEVER... EVER CONCERN YOURSELF WITH THIS FIGHT. WHAT YOUR FATHER IS DOING IS SO THAT WE CAN ALL LIVE NORMALLY. SO THAT WE CAN BE SAFE, WITHOUT HAVING TO WORRY ABOUT WHAT THESE MEN WANT TO DO TO US."

JAMILA'S MOTHER GRIPPED HER HAND SO HARD IT ALMOST HURT, BUT JAMILA DIDN'T WANT HER TO LET GO. SHE SQUEEZED BACK.

"TELL ME," JAMILA SAID.

ELSEWHERE, DAVID RUDD – A MAN WHO GREW UP ON TEX-MEX, COUNTRY MUSIC, AND THE DRUG STORE ROMANCE NOVELS HE STOLE FROM HIS MOTHER'S CLOSET TO LEARN ABOUT SEX – STOOD BEFORE A FOUR-FOOT DEEP HOLE NEXT TO A SMALL BUILDING. HIS COMMANDING OFFICER NOTICED IT AS THEY WERE DRIVING BACK FROM DROPPING OFF THEIR INFORMANT BACK AT HIS HOME. ALWAYS SUSPICIOUS OF A SHOOTER HIDING OUT IN HOLE, THEY STOPPED AND CAME OUT WITH GUNS DRAWN.

DAVID FOUND QUICKLY THAT THERE WAS NO ONE IN THE HOLE.

NO ONE ALIVE, THAT IS.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Stitched

TERROR

JONATAS GALLERY

MEPHISTO